

Chocolate: How sweet the bitter is

Now that the kids have overdosed on Halloween candy the adults deserve a turn. Bittersweet chocolate runs deep in my veins. My real weakness is cheese, but bittersweet imprinted twice on my childhood: Bittersweet Chocolate Sundaes from the Good Humor Ice Cream truck and penny squares of bittersweet from dispensers in New York City subway stations.

Double divine. Now we hear that just a bit of anti-oxidant, flavonoid-rich dark/bittersweet chocolate might lower blood pressure and otherwise benefit the heart.

So, after a half-century on the wagon, I returned to a childhood indulgence.

Good Humor Bittersweet Sundaes and subway dispensing machines are history. The FDA now regulates chocolate: Bittersweet must contain at least 35 percent chocolate liquor with up to 50 percent cocoa butter. Milk chocolate contains only about 10 percent chocolate liquor. The best highest heart-healthy bars from Lindt, Ghiradelli, Terra Nostra Organic, Chocolove and others contain 60 to 85 percent cacao — mind-blowing flavor without overpowering sweetness. Lake Champlain Chocolate offers high-quality organic dark chocolate

(55 percent cacao) squares and bulk dark baking chocolate. Expensive Ghiradelli 60 percent Cacao Bittersweet Chocolate Chips have replaced other brands in my cookies. Nestle entered the market with Chocolatier bittersweet and dark chocolate baking bars and jumbo morsels. However, bittersweet baking bars instead of conventional semi-sweet don't noticeably change the taste of cakes.

Hershey organic and bittersweet dark chocolate bars and truffles under the Cacao Reserve label lack the intensity of premium brands.

Since health reports surfaced, I'm seeing bittersweet chocolate in more places, including TV ads. Imported bars are available in supermarkets and drug stores. Awareness about living conditions of Third World cocoa-bean pickers — many of them children — has increased sales of fair trade and/or organic brands.

Fine pastry chefs have long valued Guittard and Callebaut brands that are mainstreaming baking bars and other forms: Callebaut Acticoa cocoa powder and Guittard dark chocolate "flavored" syrup are available in some grocery and gourmet stores.

Ice cream, of course. Godiva Belgian Dark Chocolate seems more complex than Ben & Jerry's straightforwardly delicious Deep Dark Chocolate.

I was unable to replicate Good Humor sundae topping, but this comes close: Melt a bar of 60-80 percent cacao over simmering water with 3 tablespoons of sour cream. Stir until smooth. Add a drop of vanilla extract and a drop of almond extract. Spoon warm over the very best vanilla ice cream.

With winter looming, I will concoct a bittersweet hot chocolate that doesn't taste like brown cow. And, recalling the good old days while preparing for good old age, I've added a square of Lindt 85 percent cocoa dark chocolate to my daily multi-vitamin, calcium tablet and low-dose aspirin. Except I wouldn't call it medicine. This is my bittersweet time capsule.

Contact Debbie Salomon at debsalomon@hotmail.com.



DEBBIE SALOMON

Table Talk

